

SERGEANT KINNAIRD

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Drawing by J. N. Marchand

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Dupre passed from Mayo's presence to shadow Preacher Black, he cut across the prairie, and, as his moccasined feet crunched the crisp grass, he broke into a dog trot, muttering, "By Gar! *nom d'un chien*, p'lice Somers! I wipe out de long score to-night! I'm dog, eh?"

And like a dog he was, head low hung from his sloped shoulders, taking with the unerring instinct of a hound a straight unbeaten path till the mission shack blurred across his way. Suddenly he stopped and turned his head till one ear drank the light breeze. The deathly stillness of the great prairie was broken by a whispering spooof-spooof of hoofs. Westward from the shack swung the carrying murmur.

Dupre raced for twenty yards to the right, and then, dropping to the prairie, lay like a hummock of grassed earth. Soon the shadowy figure of a man leading a horse loomed against the sky. Grotesquely large, they were slipping by, like the mysterious figures of a mirage, when suddenly the horse threw up its head and with a snort of terror raced backward, drawing the rein from the man's hand. Dupre's eyes gleamed in sudden ferocity as a voice, calming the frightened animal with coaxing words, carried to the cells of hate in his brain. And as its owner moved cautiously toward the horse the moon lit up the face of a man for whose life the breed thirsted.—Sergeant Kinnaird.

The trailing rein held Badger tied to the ground,—training held mastery over his fears,—and with a quick thrust of the hand Kinnaird had grasped the leather. As he moved forward, the crouching breed heard him mutter, "You fool cayuse! every boulder on the prairie is a wolf to you."

Dupre waited till horse and man blurred against the shadow of the foothills in the west; then he rose and trailed them by the muffled echo of the hoofs. Once he muttered, "By Gar! dat's funny. What's Kinnaird pulling out to de pass for?"

For half a mile the breed trailed, keeping just within sound of the moving horse. Suddenly he stopped. The calling hoofs had stilled.

"Mounting de cayuse," Dupre whispered, "*Nom de Dieu!* I got for mak' de run now."

THERE was a confused shuffle as the man swung to the saddle; then an erratic patter of pacing hoofs. Dupre broke into a trot. Presently they were slipping into the deeper gloom of Kootenay Pass, traveling between the converging lines of two foothills that reached out into the prairie, lying like the bulk of two leviathans sleeping head to head in the narrow gorge that loomed a black pillar beyond. Sometimes there was a sharp clink as the horse's hoofs struck a stone; once came back to Dupre's ears the musical splash of waters as the horseman rode a ford of the Kootenay River. Next the breed, knee deep, was plowing through the swift running stream. He cursed viciously as his moccasined feet slipped at every step on the rounded stones. He knew that Kinnaird was making his way to the still that lay hidden beyond Little Divide. The savage gloated over this discovery, muttering, "By Gar! I got him dis time! Dey'll cut out hees heart!"

He pushed on closer to the horseman; the clinking hoofs on the now stony trail would have drowned the soft whisper of his moccasins ten feet away; and the foothills threw a shadow that hid him from view.

The trail turned sharp to the left, where a stunted spruce forest crept down the hillside to the grassed flat. Twenty yards short of this the breed stopped and listened. There was no sound but the weird song of the wind in the spruce boughs. Dupre, moving into the deep shade of the trees, crept cautiously along till his feet found the path. He listened again. He could hear the hollow echo of a horse's hoofs clutching at the earth as it labored up the incline. Yes, indeed, Kinnaird was making for the still.

A hundred yards up, the path, leaving the wooded slope, wound over Little Divide, a range of rocks; and there Dupre knew Kinnaird would have to leave his horse. He found him tied to a tree, and, standing in its shade, he could see the man's figure dark against the rocky cliff, grayish white in the moonlight.

When Kinnaird had rounded a sharp turn and disappeared, Dupre followed, in his mind a savage



"The Man That Touches a Gun Dies."

exultation. He would come by positive proof of the Sergeant's deep treachery; with his own eyes he would see him discover the still; then, when he told this to the whisky outlaws, the man's life would not be worth two bits.

THE path winding up the face of Little Divide was just a narrow ledge of rock, and a hundred feet below writhed in swirling eddies Mad Squaw Rapid. As the hungry call of the tortured waters struck on Dupre's ears he shuddered; perspiration stood in beads of terror on his forehead; his Indian nature asserted itself with superstitious force. In his blood thirst he had forgotten the evil spirit of the Mad Squaw, Naskiwis, that haunted the rapid, and sometimes fastened its fingers, which were like the talons of an eagle, upon men and drew them down into waters that hid them forever and ever. No Indian of all the tribes would take that trail at night. Dupre knew that. Just beyond the point round which Kinnaird had disappeared was the edge from which the husband of Naskiwis had hurled her and her lover to the caldron of death beneath; and when he had turned that point perhaps Dupre would see the ghost of Naskiwis sitting on Squaw Rock, watching the trail above for her lover. He had met men that had seen her there in the moonlight.

The Indian that was in the breed thirsted for the life of Kinnaird, and the half-courage of the white man urged him on. At the sharp turn of the ledge a small cedar grew from the cleft in the rock and made a safety clutch for a man in his turning. As Dupre grasped it with trembling fingers, thrusting his head and shoulders hesitatingly round the curve, a pair of lurid eyes met his gaze; they were like big spirit eyes glaring at him from a white shroud. Dupre, cowering, shrank back under the leaning cedar, and as one of the lace fringed boughs touched his cheek he cried out in terror. To his ears came a rustling sound as though the Mad Squaw crept along the ledge in her spirit robes.

He crossed himself, muttering, "Holy Mother! Keep Jules Dupre from the evil spirits!" A booming "Who-who!" mingling demoniacally with the cry of the wrangling waters sounded through the gorge, and widespread wings threw grotesque black shadows across the ledge at his feet as a great white owl shot round the cliff of Little Divide.

SHUDDERING, he drew back into a niche, and leaned heavily against the wall, superstitious fear casting before his eyes the evil face of the dead squaw. His limbs trembled; and it took a cool nerve to walk safely the narrow ledge beyond the point. Suddenly a vicious thought came to him. It was like the smell of blood to an animal; the gloating fury of it steadied his nerve.

The Sergeant in turning the point on his way back would pass the rock chimney where Dupre stood, and the touch of a finger would cast him over the brink, to fall a hundred feet to the rapid beneath, even as Naskiwis and her lover had plunged to death from a push of the husband's hand.

Dupre licked his dry lips, and his yellow teeth

gleamed in the moonlight like a hyena's. It was so safe, so easy; and there would never be anything but that Kinnaird had disappeared. And to follow on the trail of the policeman now held the ghost dread; and the moonlight falling full on that side of the rock would surely betray him should the Sergeant only turn his eyes that way. His own advantage, his absolute safety, strengthened the breed's courage.

Unconsciously his hand had fallen on the hilt of a knife in his belt, and the blood lust that was over him drew it forth to gloat over as the moon silvered its blade. A thrust, a lunge at Kinnaird's body, and the blood on the blade would be like wine. He drove with the knife across the stone rail in practise, his grunting "Huh!" as he struck carrying the sucking sound of swine at feed. Then he leaned against the wall in waiting.

KINNAIRD had followed the descending stone trail of Little Divide, till it came down to the Kootenay above the boiling rapid. There it turned to the right, entering a growth of birch and cedar. Thirty yards beyond he came to a little clearing, in the center of which was a log shack. He peered cautiously from the bushes; but there was no sign of life, no sound but the subdued thunder of mad waters. Yes, every whisky jack was certainly in Stand Oil. Kinnaird thought as he passed with swift, silent feet to the shack. It was not locked; a short chain hung idly from its hasp. He flattened his ear to a crack in the door and listened. Within the log walls was heavy quiet.

He wheeled at the stealthy slip of a foot behind, fingering the moonlight with a pistol barrel. A train dog, or perhaps it was a wolf, skulked across the open and disappeared in the shadow of the trees. The door gave to his push with silent swing. As he stood beyond the threshold, listening in silence, the fancied sobs of a sleeper's breath caused him gently to close the door.

In his nostrils there crept the smell of a candle. The darkness was intense. Nothing was discernible. With silent rapidity he stepped a pace to the right, and stood with his back against the log wall. He could feel the presence of something animate. It might be just a dread born of his dangerous mission, fathered by the impenetrable gloom of the shack; but also his life hung pivoted on this delicate point. He stood in dead silence for a full minute.

Suddenly there was a faint rasp on a tin. Faint as it was, it startled Kinnaird like the crack of a pistol. Then the shack held again a smothering quiet, twin brother to the pall of darkness. The noise might have been made by a field mouse, the listening man reasoned. It had come from a spot not six feet away; and now he had an intuitive sense that a thing of life was crouched there, waiting for some move to indicate his position.

Slowly Kinnaird raised his hand, lifted his hat, and tossed it to the other side of the shack. It fell among tins with the clatter of a tripping man. A vivid shaft of fire split the darkness, thrusting out viciously like a serpent's tongue; then another and